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ABSTRACT

This study explores patterns of behaviors and attitudes, as well as the academic, demographic, social, and economic circumstances of students who have dropped out of the District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS). It also examines other factors that influence dropout attitudes, aspirations, and needs after leaving school. Factors affecting re-enrollment are explored. Data were culled from in-depth interviews with 85 principals and counselors, and 219 dropouts who were either still out-of-school or re-enrolled in a DCPS alternative or adult education program. Study findings are presented on nine tables and figures. There is a need for dropout prevention services prior to the high school level. Five recommendations for improvement are offered. (BJV)

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A STUDY OF STUDENTS WHO LEFT: D.C. PUBLIC SCHOOL DROPOUTS

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A STUDY OF STUDENTS WHO LEFT:
D.C. PUBLIC SCHOOL DROPOUTS

This study was designed with a two-fold mission: (1) to explore patterns of behaviors and attitudes, as well as the academic, demographic, social and economic circumstances of students who have dropped out of DCPS in order that future generations can be identified and prevented from dropping out; and (2) to explore other factors which influence dropout attitudes, aspirations and needs after leaving school which could ultimately affect their re-enrollment.

Study Procedures

Several sources of information were utilized for this study. Personal, in-depth interviews were conducted with two groups of dropouts: (1) dropouts still out of school; and (2) dropouts currently re-enrolled in a DCPS alternative or adult education program. In addition, the school records of the dropout participants were reviewed. Principals and academic counselors at the secondary schools, career development centers, alternative schools and adult education centers were surveyed regarding their perspective on the dropout problem.

Of all dropouts identified from DCPS for the past five years, 219 were randomly included in the study. One-hundred and nineteen (119) dropouts still out of school were interviewed by telephone and 100 currently re-enrolled in a DCPS alternative or adult education program were interviewed at their school site. In addition, 85 principals and academic counselors completed survey questionnaires.

To obtain findings representative of the general DCPS dropout population, the two dropout groups included in the study were proportionally weighted according to their actual representation (3:1; still out of school to currently re-enrolled). Descriptive statistics are presented to show the general findings of the study and multivariate analyses are used to show patterns, as well as differences among several dropout subgroups. The sample size chosen ensured that findings detected as significant would also be relatively strong in their accountability of variance.

Study Findings

As shown in Figure 1, more than one-half (56.0%) of DCPS dropouts leave school before entering or finishing their first year of high school (grade 10). In addition, more than one-half (59.0%) are male. Ninety-eight percent (98.2%) of the dropouts are Black, which is slightly more than their actual

representation of 92.0% in DCPS, and nearly three-fourths of the dropouts (74.9%) are living in family structures other than with two-parents. Nearly one-half of the dropouts (42.9%) have siblings who dropped out of school, and nearly one half (45.6%) indicated they have a parent or guardian who also dropped out. These demographics are similar for dropouts still out of school and those currently re-enrolled.

Significant differences are found between the reasons male and female students drop out of DCPS. As shown in Figure 2, more females appear to leave because of school failure (31.7%) while more males leave because of personal or family problems outside of school (31.5%). In addition, involuntary transfers to alternative and adult education programs, as well as suspensions and expulsions result into many of these students leaving school altogether (17.0%). As further shown in Figure 3, more than three-fourths (78.3%) of the dropouts were retained in grade, with more than one-half (52.1%) showing retentions two or more times. Also, more than one-half (59.9%) had failing grade point averages during their last year of school, and more than one-half (55.8%) were chronically truant. In all, however, 40.1% of the dropouts had passing GPAs their last year of school, and nearly one-fourth (21.7%) had never been retained. In general, DCPS dropouts had positive attitudes about their classes, but were less positive about their teachers. Nearly one-half (44.8%) felt dissatisfied with their teachers and felt their teachers should have had more patience with them. The majority of dropouts, however, do not seem to directly blame their teachers for their leaving school.

Within a five year period after dropping out of school, over one-half (56.6%) of all dropouts re-enroll in a DCPS alternative or adult education program, but it is estimated that less than five percent (4.5%) receive their diplomas or GEDs. The average length of time between dropping out of school and the current re-enrollment for this group was one and one-half years. One-third of the dropouts (33.0%) are currently re-enrolled, and 17.0% are enrolled in such programs for the second time. The majority of dropouts currently re-enrolled (88.9%) feel their alternative or adult program is much better than their regular school program because of the teachers, more individual attention, and a better student atmosphere.

Among the dropouts still out of school, more than one-third (39.5%) had also been re-enrolled in a DCPS alternative or adult education program at one time. Also, nearly all of the dropouts still out of school (96.8%) indicate their desire to re-enroll in some kind of educational program within the next two years.

Only one-third of DCPS dropouts (33.4%) are employed, with 20.0% employed full-time. As shown in Table 1, less than one-fourth of those employed (22.1%) are employed in "skilled" jobs.

Similar employment patterns are noted for th
currently re-enrolled and those still out of
majority of dropouts from both groups indicate th
enter professions requiring trade school degrees,
fourth (28.7%) of the dropouts re-enrolled in di
programs actually aspire to enter professions which
preparation.

pse dropouts
school. The
ir desire to
and only one-
loma and GED
require such

Factors Affecting Re-Enrollment

To examine re-enrollment patterns among dropo
groups of dropouts were divided further into four s
dropouts still out of school and never have re-enr
educational program; (2) dropouts still out of schoo
some time, re-enrolled in a DCPS alternative or ad
program; (3) dropouts currently re-enrolled in a DCP
or adult program for a shorter than average period
(4) dropouts currently re-enrolled in a DCPS al
adult program for a longer than average period.

uts, the two
ubgroups: (1)
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lt education
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ternative or

As shown in Table 2, two significant difference
between the subgroups: while those still out of
found to have left school at significantly lower
than those currently re-enrolled, those dropouts wh
out and had never re-enrolled in any educatio
(subgroup 1) had been retained significantly more of
other dropouts, $F(1,153)=3.364$, $p<.02$. Even more int
as shown in Table 3, the more frequently retair
appeared to have stayed in school significantly longe
dropout peers after reaching the legal dropout
$p<.000$). Further analyses regarding retentions also
expected, a significantly negative relationship betwe
and final GPA. However, the higher absenteeism of
dropouts was shown to be more responsible for the low
the previous grade retentions were.

s were found
school were
grade levels
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ed dropouts
r than their
ge ($r=.662$,
revealed, as
en retention
he retained
er GPAs than

No significant differences were found bet
subgroups on their reasons indicated for dro
Therefore, to further explore differences i
circumstances and attitudes which may have influ
decision to leave, several "interference fac
identified from the interview data and examined: (
personal economics (lack of personal and famil
resources); (2) negative school value orientation (la
placed on the learning experience in the regular
dissatisfaction with the school curriculum (desire for
the regular school courses); (4) dissatisfaction with
social environment (desire for changes in peer inter
the school atmosphere); (5) dissatisfaction with th
instructional climate (desire for changes in the
teaching styles); and (6) dissatisfaction with

ween these
pping out.
personal
nced their
tors" were
1) strained
y economic
ck of value
school; (3)
changes in
the school
actions and
classroom
classroom
the school

administrative policies (desire for changes in the school rules and administrators).

Overall, the greatest "interference factor" was found to be the classroom instructional climate. In fact, it was determined that dissatisfaction with the instructional climate was responsible for the higher level of absenteeism found among the retained dropouts. As shown in Table 4, it was also found that the subgroups were signficantly different only on one interference factor--the school value orientation, $F(1,164)=7.71$, $p<.006$. Those currently re-enrolled (subgroups 3 & 4) had similarly higher negative value orientations towards their regular school experience than the dropouts still out of school.

Administrative Perspective

The majority of all principals and counselors (83.1%) agree that most dropouts leave school because of personal and family problems outside of school, but less than one-half of the secondary school administrators (49.2%) feel that school problems contribute to their leaving. In addition, the administrators generally agree (71.2%) that dropouts have the aptitude to finish high school but there is a great lack of motivation. The administrators also feel that alternative programs are poorly perceived by students. Program improvements suggested by the administrators include more work-related curriculums, remedial services and parental involvement. Parental involvement seems to be particularly important in that more than one-fourth of the administrators (28.8%) feel that parents show indifference towards their children's participation in school, while the dropouts indicated that, apart from themselves, a parent had the most influence on deciding their futures.

Discussion of Findings

The findings from this study clearly show the need for dropout prevention services prior to the high school level. The findings of this study are also consistent with other national surveys showing the most prevalent cause of dropping out to be school failure and personal problems outside of school. Evidence of such problems can be found in the low achievement and school attendance levels of DCPS dropouts. However, there is also evidence that all dropouts are not school failures.

This study further supports the literature in that schools tend to alienate many of their low achieving students through the lack of adequate support mechanisms. Though the majority of DCPS dropouts appear not to blame their teachers for their leaving, they were dissatisfied with their teachers and the amount of patience shown towards them. A further sense of alienation is

revealed in this study whereby the dissatisfaction with the classroom instructional climate is found to contribute significantly to the level of absenteeism.

In addition to alienation in the classroom, many dropouts felt alienated from their schools. The issuance of unrequested transfers to alternative and adult education programs, as well as suspensions and expulsions caused many students to leave school altogether. Such rebellion is an indication that alternative and adult programs are not readily perceived as viable options by many DCPS students at-risk. However, once they experience the "outside", many dropouts subsequently choose to re-enroll in these programs on their own. And although, many are found to drop out of these programs as well, the high dropout rate from alternative and adult education programs appears to be related mostly to personal problems outside rather than to the actual programs.

With regard to employment, only one-third of the dropouts are employed, but this tends to be higher than estimates reported in national surveys which indicate that less than one-fourth of Black high school dropouts are employed. Also, interestingly, it is found that only a small portion of dropouts re-enrolled for their high school diplomas or GEDs actually aspire for professions which required such preparation. Thus, while the dropouts appear to anticipate bleak employment futures, there is yet a high regard for obtaining a high school diploma. It is speculated that the stigma of being labeled a dropout is a major incentive for many to continue their education. Also, since more than one-half of the dropouts indicated they had at least one parent or guardian to receive a high school diploma or GED, it is maintained that many DCPS parents do, in fact, serve as positive models for their children's educational attainment.

In all, however, two primary types of dropouts have been identified in DCPS. First, there are dropouts with negative school value orientations who leave blaming the school system for inadequacies, but eventually re-enroll in an alternative or adult education program. In most cases, they leave these programs as well, and some re-enroll two or more times. Thus, descriptively speaking, they should be referred to as "stopouts" rather than dropouts. While these individuals have the propensity and desire to finish school, pressures from outside as well as their own uncertainties about what a valuable school experience entails, make it exceedingly difficult for them to make the long-term commitment required to complete their program.

Secondly, there are dropouts who have been retained in grade multiple times, and upon leaving make no attempt to continue their education. While it might be presumed simply that dropouts retained more often are less motivated than others and therefore do not seek alternatives, the findings from this study suggest

the contrary. Since these individuals appear motivated to remain in school longer after reaching the legal dropout age, it is speculated that their decision to not re-enroll in school is related more so to their disillusionment with themselves rather than the lack of desire to finish school. It is argued that their prolonged experience with failure and feelings of not belonging serve to impede the psychological and emotional triumphs required for many of them to confidently attempt change and redirection on their own.

With regard to the school administrators, it is found that their views on the dropout problem were moderately inconsistent with the problems identified in this study. Only one-half of the secondary school administrators feel that "personal school problems" is a major reason why students leave, while this is, in fact, the most prevalant reason cited by the dropouts themselves. However, the majority of principals and counselors did agree that personal and family problems outside of school is a major factor. Also, while the majority of dropouts complained most about the classroom instructional climate in their schools, these were not among the improvements recommended most by the administrators.

Recommendations

Therefore, based on the findings of this study, several recommendations for improvements have been offered. While it is recognized that DCPS is currently implementing a wide array of dropout prevention services and programs, these recommendations emphasize those of importance as well as advocate different approaches to their implementation.

It is primarily recommended that: (1) more emphasis be placed on early identification of students at-risk of dropping out and early referral for intervention services, particularly school attendance services; (2) more emphasis be placed on lowering the incidence of failure through improved classroom instruction, remedial and tutorial services, and additional staff development in interpersonal relations with at-risk students; (3) the areas of counseling be expanded to include more personal issues such as coping strategies and values, social problems, and personal economics; (4) more program alternatives and personal support be provided by changing student perceptions of alternative and adult education programs, providing additional financial and counseling support to in-school parents, and providing better coordinated social services; and (5) DCPS never give up on its students by more effectively utilizing alternative programs as options to suspensions and expulsions, by making a commitment to develop and implement "individualized action plans" for all students at-risk and by ensuring that District of Columbia residents make these students priority for community support.

FIGURE 1

LAST GRADE COMPLETED

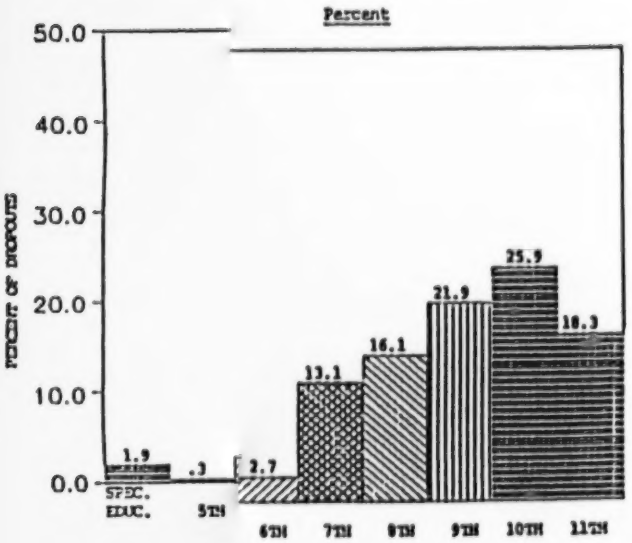

FIGURE 2

CATEGORICAL REASONS FOR DROPPING OUT OF SCHOOL

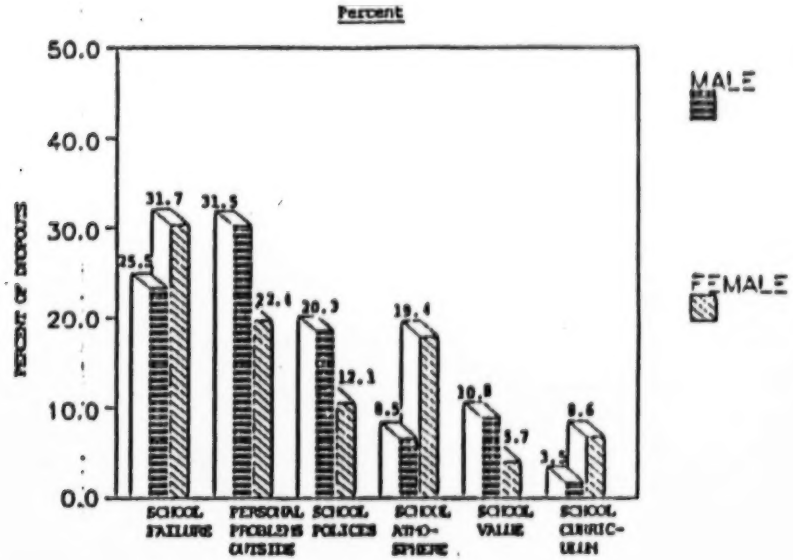

FIGURE 3

NUMBER OF TIMES RETAINED IN GRADE

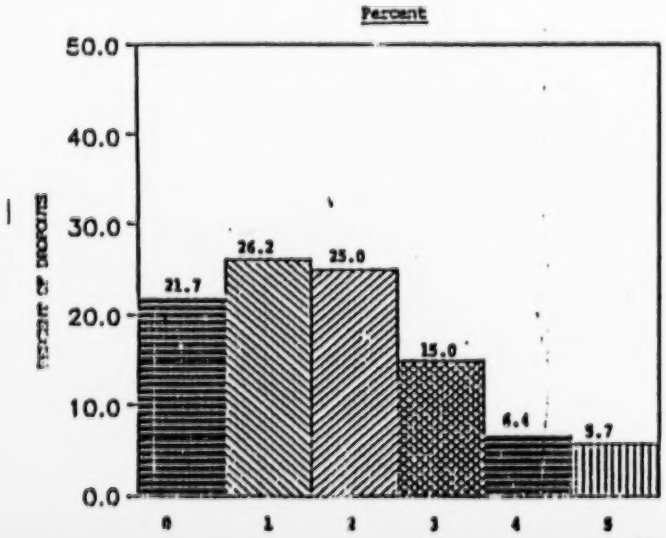

TABLE 1

Employment Positions of Working Dropouts

	Percent		
illed Positions:	Dropouts Still out of School	Dropouts Re-enrolled	All Working Dropouts
siness Clerk	5.1	8.8	6.2
to Mechanic	5.1	5.8	5.2
autician/Cosmetology	5.1	2.9	4.5
rses Aide	5.1	-	3.6
ectronics/Computers	-	5.9	1.7
tertainment	-	2.9	.9
TAL	20.4	26.3	22.1
skilled Positions:			
stodian	12.8	-	9.1
shier/Clerk	17.9	20.6	18.7
staurant/Fast Food	12.8	20.6	15.1
nstruction Worker	12.8	-	9.1
ock Clerk	7.7	-	6.3
iver	2.6	2.9	2.7
curity Guard	-	2.9	.9
y Care Provider	-	2.9	.9
TAL	79.4	70.5	77.9

TABLE 2

Differences Between Dropout Subgroups on Personal Attributes

	Subgroups					
	1 (n=72)	2 (n=47)	3 (n=59)	4 (n=41)		
	Means				F	Level of Signif.
Present Age	19.0	19.3	18.4	19.5	1.487	n.s.
Dropout Age	17.0	17.0	16.4	16.5	1.801	n.s.
Grades Completed	8.7	8.8	9.6	9.2	3.214	.024
Years Out of School	2.15	2.39	2.00	2.84	1.651	n.s.
Last * GPA	.52	.50	.79	.62	.558	n.s
Days * Absent	47.5	38.9	32.2	29.1	2.174	n.s.
Times Retained	2.1	1.9	1.0	1.5	5.091	.020

* Data available for only 44% of sample

DROPOUT SUBGROUPS

	SUBGROUP 1 (n=72)	SUBGROUP 2 (n=47)
Still Out of School	Never Re-Enrolled	Re-Enrolled Briefly
	SUBGROUP 3 (n=59)	SUBGROUP 4 (n=41)
Currently Re-Enrolled	Brief Re-Enrollment Thus Far	Long-Term Re-Enrollment

TABLE 3

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PERSONAL ATTRIBUTES

	Times Retained	Last GPA	Age Dropped	Final Grade	Final Yr. Absences
Times Retained	1.00				
Last GPA	-.249*	1.00			
Age Dropped	.663**	-.149	1.00		
Final Grade	-.429***	.105	.078	1.00	
Final Yr. Absences	.071	-.362***	.002	-.134	1.00

* p<.05
** p<.01
*** p<.001

TABLE 4

Differences Between Dropout Subgroups on "Interference Factors"

	Subgroups					
	1 (n=72)	2 (n=47)	3 (n=39)	4 (n=41)		
	means				F	Level of Signif.
personal economics	16.4	18.4	17.8	17.9	.421	n.s.
School Value	12.5	10.6	23.7	22.7	3.360	.020
School Curricu	13.0	12.1	16.4	13.8	.243	n.s.
School Atmosph	16.7	21.3	19.2	13.8	.638	n.s.
Instruct Climate	30.5	31.9	39.0	34.2	.532	n.s.
School Policies	11.1	12.8	8.5	11.0	.253	n.s.